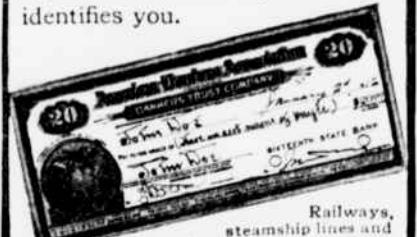


MAKING A NATION WHISTLE

Continued from page 8

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public applauded until its hands hurt, and poured its tribute of money into the box-office.

That is exactly the way it was with "After the Ball." Previous to the appearance of this song, all the songs on the market, and all being written at the time, were replete with "thees" and "thous." A plain, everyday "you" was an unheard of thing. The public did not realize just what it was tired of, but it knew it was tired of something. And when "After the Ball" came out with its plain, simple lyric the public saw in a flash that here was a song that was its song, a song that talked the way the public did, a song without "thee" or "thou" or anything of the sort, a song that called a girl "dear" and "pet" instead of "my love"; in short, a song that was natural.

If I ever write a book on the history of popular song writing in America, I am going to call it "Pet"; for I honestly believe that the appearance of that word in "After the Ball" revolutionized—indeed, started—the profession in this country. And the popular song industry is fundamentally, as American an institution as either Theodore Roosevelt or soda water. Yes, it may have been "accident"; but I do not believe it was. It just seemed "accident" (the success of "After the Ball") because it came at the birth of the popular song industry, and no one had cared or bothered about giving the matter any thought. Retrospective analysis, however, is as permissible in the present instance as it is permissible and inevitably necessary in a vastly greater, more profound science.

ONE hears a great deal about the "plugging" of songs; that is, the foisting of songs upon the public and the artificial popularization of such songs by subsidized hurdy-gurdy grinders, street singers, hustling youths in the theater galleries, and claqueurs in the audiences. Let me assure you that no song ever has been or ever can be foisted upon the public. There is no such thing as a fake song hit. Music publishers and song writers from time to time have indeed made use of the methods cited to urge their products into favor; but the urge never have, never do, and never will work.

All the fake applause in the world will not make you whistle a song if the melody does not appeal to you. All the fake singing in the world will not make you sing a song if the lyric does not appeal to you. Is this not true? And you are the person the song writer is after! A song cannot be popularized artificially, any more than a drama can be popularized artificially, through the giving away of all the seats.

Theatrical "business," scenery, costumes, anyone of a dozen items, may go to make the success of a song on the stage; but off the stage, where the real song hits are made, a song must rely on itself alone. Some of the nation's most popular songs, I feel safe in saying, might never have made stage hits.

I believe it to be impossible to collaborate with anyone in writing a popular song. I do not believe one man can write the lyrics and another the music. A man cannot put his heart into another's lyrics or music.

Not long ago a set of lyrics was submitted to me by a friend who begged me to write the music for them. The lyrics were splendid, a sure success in their way; but I refused to attempt to set them to music. I did not "feel" them. And I knew that, for this reason, any music I might write for them, however melodious, would fail in the long run. If I did not feel the lyrics, the public assuredly would also fail to feel them through my music.

THERE is vast difference between song writing and popular song writing. Falling off a log and writing songs are probably the two easiest things in the world; but staying on a log and writing popular songs are two of the most difficult things. I do not write here of songs that will live; but merely popular songs of the day, or year or decade. The writing of a song that will live is a matter for discussion on the part of another pen than mine. Such an achievement, unfortunately, has not been my privilege. One man in one hundred million can write a "Suwanee River" or a "My Old Kentucky Home." And I, alas! do not happen to be such a man. So I must confine myself to my own restricted and lesser sphere. And I must rest content to let other men make the nation's laws and eternal songs while I make its transient, popular songs.

As in everything else, originality is of prime importance in the writing of popular songs. At the present time I am busy getting up a coonsong the grammar of which will be correct, in which there will be no such

sentence as "there ain't no," etc., and in which there are to be no references to pork chops and chicken. I predict that it will be a hit for this very reason.

There are in this country about a hundred and fifty thousand persons, I have estimated, who are trying to write popular songs and reap the resultant golden harvest. I personally receive about fifty thousand manuscripts every year from these amateur ballad writers, and the one great predominating and ruinous fault in all of them is lack of originality. The moment some such song as "I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now" makes a hit, all the would-be popular song writers in all the surly districts try to duplicate the hit with some such related lyric as "I Wonder Who's Her Beau Now," "I Wonder Who's Admiring Her," and "I Wonder if She'll Ever Let Another Fellow Kiss Her." Of course, there is no chance for imitations of this order, and consequently the vast volunteer army of song writers wastes its time and postage stamps.

A BIG, popular song hit is rarely, if ever, duplicated out of itself. That is, nothing exactly or even nearly like the original will gain the success, or a measure of the success, of the original song hit. The song writer may appropriate the style of emotion represented in the popular song (as indicated in a way in the instance of sentiment in the "six best sellers" list already quoted); but he may not follow the precise lyric or music method of the first hit in representing his emotion. He must exploit that emotion—the one the public feels and desires at the time—in a different manner.

To illustrate the variety of ways in which the same central subject may be set forth in a song, let me take the idea of the child whose mother has died and who wants to communicate with her, in the belief that such communication is still possible.

First, you may utilize the idea in a song like "Hello, Central, Give Me Heaven," the intrinsic method of which is sufficiently conveyed through the title. Then, again, you may work out the idea in a song like "Shall I Find My Mama There?" using a policeman as the figure through whom the innocent and lonely child tries to find his mother who has died. Or, still again, you may work out the idea in a child's plaint, "I Want to Buy a Little Bit of Love," telling the story through the secondary medium of a shopkeeper to whom the youngster, whose mother has died and whose life is made miserable by a step-mother, goes in the hope of being able to purchase love, if the shopkeeper will be so good as to get the child's real mother to send some of it down from Heaven.

I might go on indefinitely and detail other methods for the exploiting of the same emotion; but I believe I have explained the case in point with sufficient clarity. The three songs mentioned are from my own pen, and their success bears out the truth of my contention. You must invent new ways of producing and injecting the same emotion in popular songs. It will not do that you seek to exploit the desired emotion in a manner in which it has already been exploited.

WRITING songs to order is much like delivering laundry. It is neither difficult nor remunerative, and it is anything but satisfying to oneself. The method is something like this:

When "Natural Gas" was produced, Eddie Gavin came to me (this was way back in the Milwaukee phase of my career) and told me to write him an "Alderman song." "I play the part of an Alderman in the show," he explained.

"What's your character's name?" I asked.
"Michael O'Cork," said he.

Result: A song called "Alderman Michael O'Cork." Remuneration: Ten dollars (still due). Final whistling power: nil. The song was all right in its way, I suppose; but it was hack work, uninspired, not particularly original, and with no justifiable cause for living—aye, even breathing.

It soon developed, however, that the public grew weary of the "Alderman Michael O'Cork" kind of songs and demanded something fresh and new. And as soon as I had saved up twenty-five dollars—the net proceeds from four hack songs—I paid up my board five weeks in advance and started to size up the nation's lips, with a view toward making them form a little O through which to whistle my tunes. I threw aside all the old restraining conventions and let my heart poke its way into my own puckered, practising lips—and pretty soon I had the satisfaction of seeing other lips than my own blowing out my melodies and gradually blowing in money toward my pockets.

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